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ABSTRACT

The relationship between writing skills development and cognitive development is the focus of numerous research studies and deserves significant consideration in curriculum planning. Writing development studies indicate that as children work through the various modes of discourse (argumentation, exposition, narration, and description), they exhibit differing levels of syntactic complexity in direct proportion to their real-life involvement. Similarly, cognitive studies demonstrate that intellectual development is a process of organizing and reorganizing cognitive structures. At different developmental stages, a child will use different levels of language skills. These changes occur as old cognitive operations are absorbed by newer, more complex ones. The practical application of these findings requires that the classroom teacher shift the emphasis in the teaching of writing from a product-oriented approach to one that encourages the development of current thinking processes. (MAI)

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CHANGING THE QUESTIONS: Psycholinguistics and Writing

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CHANGING THE QUESTIONS: Psycholinguistics and Writing

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Mid-life crises are becoming more popular now as a bulging population moves through its thirties. The laments abound, but one of the more humorous ones goes something like this: "After years of struggling--just when I think I've got the answers--they up and change the questions."

When we view what is going on in writing research today, we might sense a kind of mid-life crises like that one. It has long been held that writing skills grow on paper as thinking skills grow in the mind. Investigators have concentrated on solving the question of how mental growth affects writing ability. However, since the revolution in linguistics and the recent traumas of classroom experimentation, the question has begun to change. Now we seem to be asking: How may writing lead to more clarity in thinking?

The general nature of that question reflects the general level of research today. But we are beginning to note similarities in findings from psycholinguistic and writing inquiries. And it is the insight promised from such parallel discoveries that appears to be changing the questions today.

Writing Development Studies

Recent advances in writing development studies have led the way. Nowhere does the surface of language better reveal its underlying complexity than in the writing of children across the grades. In groping their way toward mature expression, children begin writing by adding little sentences together, gradually move through stages of reducing and deleting repetition, and finally emerge with elaborate subordinating and transforming powers. Such insights have emerged

from the pioneering cross-sectional studies of Hunt (1965, 1970) and the longitudinal work of Loban (1976).

Recently, the modes of discourse also have provided some insights regarding the maturing syntactic abilities of young writers. By modes of discourse, I refer to the classical distinctions among arguing a point of view (argumentation), explaining a process (exposition), telling a sequence of events (narration), and depicting details (description). Seegars (1933) originated this direction in research with a study of fourth, fifth, and sixth graders which revealed how children use more complex subordination in writing arguments than they do writing explanations or stories and descriptions.

San Jose (1972) analyzed fourth grade writings and found that the highest level of syntactic complexity occurred in argumentation, followed by exposition, narration, and description. Mode-based insights in writing also have been reported by Kincaid (1953), Johnson (1967), Bortz (1969), Veal and Tillman (1971), and Perron (1976, 1977). Similar findings in speech research have been reported by Pope (1974).

The accumulating evidence seems to affirm that the modes of discourse result in significantly different levels of syntactic complexity. This variability in syntax leads to questions about possible explanations for children's development in writing. Several investigators have suggested there may be interesting "natural" solutions to the question of writing development. By experiencing different modes, it may be natural for a child's writing powers to stretch to higher, more complex structures.

This idea seems to support the concepts of James Moffett in Teaching the Universe of Discourse (1968). His "whole discourse" approach to composition consists of several aspects of the writing act, including the influence of audience, subject matter, modes, environment, cognitive stage, and other entities.

In writing, students mesh all the separable parts of the composing process into a multi-dimensional act. Writing development, according to Moffett, occurs naturally in context with real-life or purposeful involvement.

Cognitive Development Ties

Such concerns for natural writing development provide insights for linking cognitive and linguistic processes. Perhaps developmental connections with writing can be understood best by reviewing some of the findings from cognitive studies.

Piaget has described intellectual development as a process of organizing and re-organizing cognitive structures. Experience from outside the organism effects what Piaget calls the equilibrium-disequilibrium-equilibrium process. With each re-organization of the mental structures, the old cognitive operations are absorbed by the newer, more complex ones.

Such an explanation comes very close to the linguistic growth explanation put forth by Menyuk (1969) and C. Chomsky (1969). Their separate studies demonstrate how the child attaining more complex sentence powers incorporates previous syntactic structures into more advanced ones.

Developmental psycholinguists have noted other similarities between the two areas. Sinclair-de-Zwart (1969) reported that children at different developmental stages used different levels of language skills; she concluded that "operational structuring and linguistic structuring or rather linguistic restructuring thus parallel each other." (p. 275)

Such parallel entities may develop in a related way, but there is no empirical evidence as to which precedes the other. Slobin (1971) believes cognition precedes language, but admits: "We are just beginning to sense the intimate relations between linguistic universals and cognitive universals, and

are far from an adequate developmental theory of either." (p. 176) Piaget (1970) sees the two structuring processes as leaning on one another in a circular manner.

Educational psychologists have studied qualitative changes in children's beginning writings. Anderson and Bashaw (1967) described an intervention program used in teaching the writing of description and argumentation themes. They concluded that the measured effect on description may have been larger because of developmental constraints regarding the argumentation themes.

Overall, a developmental picture seems to be surfacing which illustrates psycholinguistic restrains underlying writing and thinking, and which demonstrates a developmental connection standing behind all surface productions of language. In an article scheduled for publication in English Education's Spring issue, I attempt to relate the educational value of such studies. Ken Kantor and I used collected children's writings to explore the connections of these findings with actual products in last October's Language Arts. And recently, we've been in contact with investigators in Canada to pool our efforts for further research.

What I sense emerging in psycholinguistic attention to writing is a concentration on an area which linguists have not attempted to tackle--perhaps wisely. That is the area of performance.

Ever since Chomsky (1965) described the difference between competence and performance in linguistics, competence has received the spotlight. The rationale has been obvious: if you want to understand the way language is acquired and developed in a child, you first concentrate on competence, the formal representation of linguistic knowledge. Chomsky had spoken of the study of performance as a limited branch of science in which even a piece of bubble gum in the mouth could interfere. Since his warning, not only has performance sat off-stage, it has also been relegated to a status totally

dependent upon competence. Wherever competence led, performance was sure to follow. However, language education researchers are interested in children's performance as well as their competence.

Recently, developmental psycholinguists like Cairns and Cairns (1976) have breathed new life into the prospects for the theory of language performance. According to the Cairns,

> It is insufficient to speak merely of linguistic competence and linguistic performance. We cannot discuss linguistic development without beginning to talk about conceptual development and the growth in the child of the fundamental ability to communicate. We cannot talk about syntax in the child and ignore the semantic aspects of his developing linguistic system. Most important, we can no longer speak of linguistic performance as consisting of skills based on an abstract competence because we have seen that performance skills are in a very real sense precursors of linguistic competence. (p. 227)

The overall search appears to be for a theory of mind that, among other things, grants equal status to competence and performance, with the result that they operate on a two-way street.

Charlesworth (1976) has commented that Piaget's theory "does not specify which real-life experiences are directly involved in the process of cognitive change. Hence there is an important gap that has to be filled in to give his theory more credibility." He claims that psychologists and ethologists currently are combining their talents to reveal "how Piaget's cognitive structures are 'naturally expressed' in the life of the children and have adaptive significance." (p. 161)

Writing research also appears to hold promise for explaining cognitive change via real life experiences. Writing's evidence places <u>function</u> in language use in a crucial relationship with <u>form</u>, based on an interdependent relationship between competence and performance. Such an explanation provides a glimpse of possible "natural expression" encouraging cognitive development.

Piaget's definition of the mind as possessing its own built-in means for growth, also could be given linguistic definition. Not only may experience impinge upon the mind to stimulate equilibration, it may do so at varying levels or ranges of structural complexity--as modes may be considered to influence syntactic changes in writing. The functional base of experience would then play an analogical role in assimilation-accommodation processes for structuring formal cognitive operations.

Classroom Connections

But enough of the terminology. Let's turn to the classroom. The new kinds of questions and concerns emerging from psycholinguistic insights spotlight new ways of looking at school writing programs. There is no doubt that writing's role in the classroom is changing--and would, I believe, with or without the basics movement.

Along with a re-examination of writing's place in the curriculum, we should re-examine our attitudes as teachers toward writing. My own attitude is that writing is such a lofty enterprise, I'm not sure whether to even attempt it myself. I mean, after all...Hemingway...Kafka...Dostoevski...Shakespeare. How dare anyone imagine they can.... Well, anyway, my sense--and perhaps yours--is that writing is an undertaking fit only for great minds.

As a teacher, I get excited whenever I find a student who can <u>really</u> write well. But our emerging insights regarding the potential of writing experiences to stretch and encourage thinking runs counter to such a reaction. All students should have a chance to write well. What I'm trying to establish here is the educational importance of the writing act itself. Too often I consider classroom writing a product and not a process. The products are traces of minds in motion, and in the classroom these products are usually short-circuited and forced up prematurely in our continuous search for evidence that students can think and account for their learning. Unfortunately, the products fail to

mirror what I consider good writing (you know, what Hemingway, Kafka, etc. did).

I'm like many other teachers who received this kind of product-oriented instruction in their passage through the grades. We have ended up fearing writing, since it may give us away for what we are (whatever that may be). That kind of teaching may keep the ranks of successful writers thinned, but it leaves teachers feeling incompetent and powerless to encourage writing in the classroom. We are left to latch onto whatever comes along--in print, of course (workbooks, texts, media, as long as it has print's imprimatur!).

Perhaps it is our culture which has placed print so high, as McLuhan has suggested. But think about that in light of today's best-seller from H. R. Haldeman--or worse, his mentor Richard Nixon. The fabric of greatness revealed by print is stretched to breaking as best-sellers are created by the media and its manipulators, like the Robert Ringers who promote themselves into the same category as our favorites.

It's a quandary for the literary buff. Publishing is no longer the sine qua non. Of course, I'm sort of manipulating this for my purpose, since I want to point out the ridiculousness with which some of us worship print. We educators are especially vulnerable, since we have been trained via the so-called best books and easily end up believers. And yet, all this translates into methods in our classrooms that can only define writing as an assembly line for products. The insights from early psycholinguistic inquiries into writing and thinking require a definite break with any assumption that a child's future publications are the reason for his or her instruction in writing. The question today directs itself to how cognitive development may be a more important reason for that child's writing program.

I'd like to put my point more bluntly: To hell with Hemingway. Kiss off Kafka. Dump Dostoevski. Shake Shakespeare. They're all merely persons who learned to think well on paper by doing it--for many reasons, in many ways, for

many people, in many situations, etc.

Wait. Before throwing the tomatoes, let me point out that I still love and cherish those great writers. Believe me, I'm just as much a product of my education as anyone here. I believe. Yet, I find my belief growing less meaningful as the questions turn away from writing as a product for future greatness to writing as a process for encouraging current thinking processes. Yes, I am a product of my readings of the great writers. I learned great things, vicariously experienced lifetimes of ideas! But still, I'd like to thank them by granting them a place closer to me, away from their former godliness.

I believe writers are human beings who merely have the tenacity to sit in their lonely places and work on thoughts until they emerge with something important to say to the rest of us. When we accept writers as fellow humans who have experienced thinking at its highest levels, we can more clearly see writing's place in the schools. The products of great writers are fantastic, but they evolved through a lengthy process of thinking and revising thought--a process with a most beneficial educational value.

The questions are changing in education. They are reflections of society at large, a society constantly in flux. The answers each generation comes up with may not settle things for all time but may simply cause others to change the questions. Past answers to the connections between writing and thinking are today leading us to investigate the possible impact of writing on thinking. The act of writing emerges as a crucial part of that question. The results obtained from future research may provide new instructional methods for teaching and more supportive attitudes for teachers--and more important, perhaps some new questions for education in general.

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